

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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SUBJECT: NEWSPAPER STRIKE IN PANAMA CITY

1. AT 0730 THURSDAY, JUNE 8, APPROXIMATELY 950 MEMBERS OF THE UNION OF TYPOGRAPHERS AND GRAPHIC ARTS WORKERS COMMENCED A STRIKE AGAINST 18 PRINTING FIRMS COMPRISING THE NATIONAL CHAMBER OF GRAPHIC ARTS. FIRMS STRUCK INCLUDE VIRTUALLY ALL JOB AND COMMERCIAL PRINTERS IN PANAMA CITY, AND THE STAR AND HERALD COMPANY, PUBLISHER OF SEMI-INDEPENDENT MORNING DAILIES "STAR AND HERALD" (ENGLISH) AND "LA ESTRELLA DE PANAMA" (SPANISH). LATTER TWO PAPERS ANNOUNCED IN JUNE 8 EDITIONS THAT THEY WOULD NOT APPEAR UNTIL STRIKE HAD BEEN RESOLVED.

2. EDITORA RENOVACION, S.A. (ERSA), PUBLISHER OF REMAINING THREE PANAMA CITY DAILIES (MORNING "CRITICA" AND "MATUTINO" IN SPANISH, AFTERNOON "LA REPUBLICA" IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH), ALTHOUGH A MEMBER OF CHAMBER OF GRAPHIC ARTS, HAS APPARENTLY NOT BEEN STRUCK BY UNION AT THIS TIME. EMBASSY
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HAS BEEN ADVISED THAT WORKERS AT THIS FIRM (WHOSE PAPERS ARE THOUGHT TO BE GOVERNMENT-SUBSIDIZED) INTEND TO REMAIN AT WORK "UNTIL THE WORKERS AT THE STAR AND HERALD REQUEST THEIR SUPPORT."
3. PRINCIPAL POINT IN DISPUTE, ACCORDING TO PUBLISHED REPORTS, IS WAGES, ON WHICH PARTIES ARE FAR APART: LAST UNION DEMAND WAS EIGHT CENTS/HOUR

INCREASE IMMEDIATELY AND SIX CENTS MORE IN JUNE 1979; LAST MANAGEMENT OFFER WAS THREE CENTS IMMEDIATELY AND ONE CENT MORE IN JUNE 1979.

4. BOTH UNION AND GRAPHIC ARTS CHAMBER HAVE BEEN ISSUING PRESS RELEASES AND COMMUNIQUE FOR A WEEK OR MORE; CONTENT IS PREDICTABLE--EACH SIDE ACCUSES THE OTHER OF IGNORING ECONOMIC REALITIES AND OF WILLFUL INTRANSIGENCE. CHAMBER CLAIMS SEVERAL MEMBER FIRMS ARE ON EDGE OF BANKRUPTCY AND CANNOT SUPPORT DEMANDED INCREASES; UNION COUNTERS THAT IT IS RESPONSIBLE NEITHER FOR INEFFICIENT MANAGEMENT NOR FOR INFLATION ERODING REAL WAGES. UPON ANNOUNCEMENT OF STRIKE, UNION RECEIVED PUBLIC SUPPORT FROM ITS NATIONAL CONFEDERATION, THE COMMUNIST-DOMINATED CNTP, WHILE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE (CONEP) AND OTHER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS HAVE CONDEMNED STRIKE AS NEW EVIDENCE OF LABOR IRRESPONSIBILITY.

5. COMMENT: FROM WHAT WE CAN LEARN IN LABOR CIRCLES, THERE IS LITTLE MORE TO THIS DISPUTE THAN MEETS THE EYE--THE REAL BASIC ISSUE IS WAGES. TYPOGRAPHERS ARE AMONG BEST-PAID CRAFTSMEN IN PANAMA, BUT THEIR UNION IS HISTORICALLY FORCEFUL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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IN BARGAINING. UNION FAILURE TO STRIKE ERSA PAPERS MAY BE DUE IN PART TO GOVERNMENT PRESSURE TO KEEP ITS MEDIA OPEN FOR RETURN OF ARNULFO ARIAS AND VISIT BY PRESIDENT CARTER, BUT IS ALSO SAID IN LABOR CIRCLES TO BE A DELIBERATE UNION TACTIC TO PRESSURE STAR AND HERALD COMPANY. LABOR MINISTRY HAS BEEN ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN MEDIATION, WITHOUT SUCCESS TO DATE. UNDER LAW 95 OF 1977, MINISTRY HAS POWER TO INVOKE BINDING ARBITRATION TO END DISPUTE, BUT WE HAVE HEARD NOTHING TO INDICATE THAT IT IS YET CONSIDERING DOING SO. IT APPEARS TO US THAT STAR AND HERALD PAPERS WILL BE OUT OF CIRCULATION, ALONG WITH REST OF STRUCK FIRMS, FOR SEVERAL DAYS AT LEAST WHILE MINISTRY CONTINUES ATTEMPT TO COMPOSE DIFFERENCES ON WAGES. JORDEN

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